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MITHRAISM



FIG. 1.—BAS-RELIEF FROM NEUENHEIM. Cumont, *M.M.M.*, vol. ii., plate v., monument No. 245.

MITHRAISM

By

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MITHRAIC CHRONOLOGY

- B.C. (*circ.*) 1350. Mitra is named as a god of the **Mitanni** (N. Mesopotamia).
408. **Artaxerxes II.** (Memnon) exalts M. to the side of Ahura Mazda.
331. Final overthrow of the Persian Empire (the cult of M. diffused and carried on in **Asia Minor**).
- 69-34. **Antiochus**, king of **Commagene** (Mithraic Monument on **Nimrud Dagh**).
67. Pompey reduces the **Cilician pirates**, who are said to teach Mithraism to the Romans.
- A.D. 16-17. **Cappadocia** becomes a Province (Tiberius).
63. Annexation of **Pontus Polemoniacus** (Nero).
72. Incorporation of **Commagene** in Syria (Vespasian). [**The Mithraic 'Invasion' proceeds largely from these new provinces.**]
- 71-2. The **XVth Legion** carries M. from the East to the **Danube frontier**.
80. Statius alludes to the Mithraic sacrifice.
- 69-96. (?) Oldest Mithraic dedication yet discovered in Roman Empire.
- 138-180. (**Pius and Marcus Aurelius.**) Increasing popularity of Mithraism which culminates in the reign of
- 180-192. **Commodus**, who is himself an Initiate.

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- 193-211. (Sept. Severus.) Mithraism forms the backbone of the religious syncretism under the Severi. The **Domus Augustana** contains a private Spelaeum.
- 211-217. **Caracalla** favours the Cult, and allows a shrine to be constructed under his Baths.
- 218-253. Dated monuments grow scarcer, until after the death of Gallus ; they **cease** for about fifty years.
275. **The loss of Dacia** deals a heavy blow to the Cult.
307. Renewed popularity of the Mysteries under **Diocletian**, who, with the other Augusti and Caesares, honours M. as the '**Favourer of his Empire.**'
312. The first triumph of Christianity after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.
- 361-363. **Julian** revives Mithraism.
- 364-390. A few illustrious families continue to celebrate the Mysteries under Valentinian, Valens, Gratian, and **Theodosius**, the last of whom publicly prohibits the practice of Pagan rites.

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MITHRAISM

CHAPTER I

FOREWORD

THE peculiar interest of Mithraism lies in a strange and fascinating contradiction. From the materials which have now been collected we can derive an extensive knowledge of its outer structure, but we are still unable with any certainty to penetrate its inner meaning. We have now for some years paced the Outer Courts; we recognise as familiar the Monuments and Temples of the Cult; but we have not yet gained admission to the Sanctuary; and can only guess at the doctrines which lie hidden—often in rudest guise—beneath the storied pilasters of Reliefs.

The reason for this knowledge and for this still greater ignorance is not far to seek. **Literary Evidence** for Mithraism is of the sparsest description. The **Greek Writers** who made this their special study have come down to us only as

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names.¹ Others, who—like **Plutarch** and **Porphry**—used their works with the sole object of reinforcing Philosophy by Religion, have so often allowed zeal to outrun credulity that the very wildness of their interpretations tends to cast suspicion upon the evidence which they employed.

Finally, it is useless to expect help from that small band of scholarly Initiates at the head of which we must place the Emperor **Julian**. He, with his fellow mystics, can speak only with the reticence imposed by a mysterious oath; and we turn, disappointed, from the studied vagueness of his pious aspirations.

We have spoken in the preceding paragraphs of **Pagan Authors** only. Cannot the **Christian Fathers** tell us something about these strange Persian Mysteries, which rose to power in the Roman Empire, while their own creed was still struggling for bare existence?

A little, indeed, they have told us; and we shall deal with their evidence in a later chapter,² for it has a value and importance of its own. But, in the main, they too have kept silence on the subject, either because they saw in Mithraism an enemy too strong to be crushed by words alone,

¹ *E.g.* Pallas, Eubulus.

² See below, chap. vii. p. 84 *sq.*

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or because they found in it little which they could whole-heartedly condemn.

In either case, as we shall see, they would not have been mistaken. We know now that, at one period in his history, Mithras was worshipped in every corner of the Latin World, from Spain to Anatolia, from the 'Wall' in Britain to Alexandria and Memphis; and more than this, that he was invoked not merely by the humblest classes in the Empire, but by the Commanders of Legions, by the Governors of Provinces, by the Emperors themselves. The Church knew this only too well, and may have seen in it a good reason for postponing a trial of strength.

There was however a second argument for silence. To the outward eye the two religions of Mithras and Christ appeared to differ in accidental details only; at many important points they presented the most startling resemblances, which Christian apologists admitted with horror, but could not explain except by a charge of diabolical agency. Too much can be, and has been, made of these similarities; but their existence, which lends the subject an additional interest, smothered the voice of Christian execration, and may account for our singular lack of information from the quarters which should have been most eager to provide it.

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Literature, then, both Christian and Pagan has little enough to tell us about the rites and doctrines of Mithraism, and nothing at all about its growth and diffusion: it merely co-ordinates and interprets the materials at our disposal. For the history, and for the symbolism of the Cult, we must turn to another source.

It is **Archaeology**, and Archaeology alone, which has rescued the study of the Mysteries from the frantic conjectures of the eighteenth century, and settled it upon a sure foundation of scientific research. At the present day there are few museums in Europe which do not contain some trace, some relief or inscription, some rough monument of the Iranian god. In Great Britain, where Mithras has for the most part left his monuments along the northern frontier of the Roman Province, they have provoked less interest than in countries where they are more thickly distributed, and where his Cult-objects are familiar to all. For our, at least apparent, indifference there may once have been the excuse of ignorance, though even this has now largely been removed.¹ To any one with even a partial knowledge of the facts, the charge of unattractiveness could never

¹ Notably by the magnificent work of F. Cumont (see Bibliography).

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be sustained. What greater charm can any subject have than that of baffling mystery, of half detected but still unsolved Enigma?

That is the one side of Mithraism: the other is of even wider interest. It shows us the last religion of Paganism locked in that supreme struggle with Christianity, which was to decide the spiritual hegemony of the old Western World.

To reach this point of our inquiry however we have first to travel far. Mithraism, as we find it at the moment of that crisis, was a system of the utmost complexity. Its origins were lost in the gloom of a remote past. It came to Rome as a child of the distant East which had been exposed to centuries of foreign influence before it ever attained the frontiers of the Promised Land. If we are to understand it at all, we must try to recover the details of its eventful career: we must go back to the mountains in which it first saw the light, and from that starting-point retrace the paths which it pursued. We have then, in our survey, to answer three questions:—

- (1) What was the origin of Mithras?
- (2) Whence and through what lands did he come?
- (3) How did he force his way across the frontiers of the Roman Empire?

CHAPTER II

MITHRAS IN ASIA

THE god *Mitra*¹ was worshipped by the Indian and Iranian races at a date long anterior to their separation. Of this period we have, needless to say, no historical record; but it is possible, by comparing the liturgical utterances of these two peoples, to form a general idea of the character and attributes which had been ascribed to him from time immemorial. The conceptions of the *Vedic Hymns* do not differ radically from those of the Zoroastrian *Yashts*: in form however they are certainly more primitive, and this fact alone entitles them to the first place in our examination.

In the *Vedic Hymns* Mitra is almost invariably coupled with the Sky-god Varuṇa (Grk. *οὐρανός*), whose material attributes he seems to share. The

¹ Mitra in Sanskrit = 'Friendship' or 'Friend.' Mithra in Avestan = 'Compact.'

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reason for this is obvious. Varuṇa represented the Luminous Heaven : Mitra the Heavenly Light : the two together were invoked as Co-creators, who have fixed the heaven and the earth, who give fertility to plants and cattle, whose eye is the Sun, whose Sovereignty is universal and irresistible, etc. From their throne on high they contemplate all things perishable and imperishable ; and with an eye that never closes, they spy out all the deeds of men.¹ At the end of the Vedic period, Mitra, who had been regarded as the god of Daylight, became the god of Truth ; a very natural transition from the physical to the moral aspect of divinity.

The same change took place in the Zoroastrian code ; a change all the more inevitable in the strictly ethical and abstract atmosphere of the (so-called) Zend-Avesta.

It is necessary to reaffirm the important fact that the Creed of Zoroaster at no time represented the ancient religion of the whole Iranian race. It was a deliberate *Reformation* of those older naturalistic beliefs which belonged to the period of the great Aryan Unity. In studying Mithraism this point should never be forgotten, for, as we shall see, the greatest divergencies existed between

¹ Rigv. 5, 69, 1 ; 6, 51, 1 ; 6, 67, 5 ; 7, 61, 3.

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the Romano-Persian Mysteries and Orthodox Zoroastrianism.

In the *Avesta* the rôle of *Mithra* is subordinate, though by no means negligible. The creation of the six Amesha-Spentas, abstract emanations from the moral nature of the supreme Ahura, had degraded the god of Light with his more material attributes to the rank of a Genie (Yazata), but it is these very attributes which prevented his disappearance from the new Theology. As the presiding spirit of Light¹ and Heat, it was he who conferred upon mankind all the blessings of fertility and happiness, which the demons of Darkness and Winter sought constantly to destroy. He is the Lord of Vast Pasturages who gives life to Plants and Cattle, and health and riches to all those who invoke him. It is his mission to protect the creation of Ahura from the evil spirits (Daêvas) who are ceaselessly producing barrenness and suffering, vice and uncleanness upon the earth. Upon these spirits he wages implacable

¹ As the god of Light, M. occupied a 'middle' place in the air (Vayu) between the splendour of Heaven and the gloom of Hell. He was thus called the Mediator (*Μεσιτης*) (Plutarch de Iside, c. 46), a title later transferred by Mazdaeans to his relations between Ormuzd and mankind. There is no trace of this doctrine in Mithraism, and Christian writers do not refer to it in spite of the obvious parallel in their own religion.

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war, spying them out from his lofty throne and descending in full armour to overthrow them. Nor is it only the invisible army of Angra Mainyu (Ahriman) which falls beneath his might. He is the dread enemy of all wicked men; he utterly destroys the tribes and nations which are hostile to him; while he ensures the victory of those who honour him with piety; and turns aside from his Faithful the darts and swords of their assailants.¹

Thus Mithra is the foe of spiritual impurity and godlessness, as he is the destroyer of material barrenness and filth; but there are two chief aspects in which he may be represented.

(1) He is a very *Lord of Hosts*. It is generally assumed that it was this which attracted to his service the Achaemenid monarchs, and in later centuries the Caesars and their legionaries. But this is to lose sight of his second and more important characteristic, for (2) Mithra was for all time the **God of Truth**, that most conspicuous of the Persian virtues. In his name the most solemn oaths were taken and the most important contracts confirmed. Moreover, it was for works of *Piety*, not of Valour, that Mithra shed upon monarchs the **Heavenly Glory** (*Hvarenô*), which was the peculiar ornament and protection of the

¹ Mihir Yasht (pass).

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righteous ruler ; that Glory, which in later days, under the name of *Τύχη* or *Fortuna*, justified for the Roman Emperors their title of 'Lord and God.' That it was this doctrine of the Imperial Glory, which attracted the Caesars to the Cult, is, at the least, extremely probable ; but may we not trace its wider popularity as much to the spiritual as to the military aspect of the Persian deity ? This is a question which will be discussed in another place, but we must add that for several reasons the evidence of the Avesta is, at best, of indirect value for our present purpose. Not merely are the outlines of its picture pale and blurred, but the whole position and relative importance of the gods are very far removed from the features and exploits of the heroic figure of the Reliefs. Upon such traditions as Mithraism seems to have preserved, the hand of the reformer was heavy indeed : yet the invocations of *Mithra-Ahura* which survive in the Zoroastrian books—mere memories of a forgotten past, as meaningless to the orthodox worshipper as they were inconsistent with the main doctrines of his creed—should warn us that in Irân the older naturalistic theology never died ; and may suggest that in Mithraism we have to deal with some of the most primitive legends of the Persian race. This

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belief is still further strengthened when we approach the history of the god and consider the circumstances of his first appearance.

It is a curious fact that the earliest historical mention of the name *Mitra* is found not in Iran or India, but among a people called the **Mitanni**, who inhabited northern Mesopotamia in the fourteenth century B.C.¹ He was invoked in their treaties as a national god with *Varuṇa*, *Indra*, and the *Nâsatiya* (*Asvins*). We are not concerned to ask how his companion deities faded from the memory of this outpost of the Indo-Iranian stock, but it must be remarked that the Romano-Persian *Mithras* seems to have usurped the characteristics and traditional exploits of *Indra*, and it may be suggested that the absorption took place rather in this Mesopotamian pantheon than among the races of a remoter age. The districts which adjoined the opposite bank of the *Euphrates* at this point, and which were largely comprised under the later kingdom of *Commagene*, showed a zealous adherence to *Mithras* under *Seleucid* rule. It is therefore unwise to discount the effects of this earlier and more primitive tradition,

¹ Winckler: *Mittel. der Deut. Or. Gesellsch.*, No. 35, 1907, p. 51. The name *Mitra* is found in cuneiform at least as early as the seventh century B.C.

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situated in the very heart of the Empire which was carved out by Cyrus and his Achaemenid successors.

With this naturalistic religion of the Mitanni the ancient Iranian theology was, if we except certain inevitable changes, in complete agreement. 'It is the custom of the Persians,' says Herodotus,¹ 'to offer sacrifice to Zeus on the highest peaks of the mountains, and they call Zeus the whole circle of the sky. They sacrifice also to Sun and Moon, earth, fire, water, and winds. These are the only gods to whom they have sacrificed from the beginning.' Among the Persians, the principal Ahura (Vedic Asura) had dispensed with his 'skynname' Varuṇa: but in their essence the two religions were the same; and, what is more significant, both were equally at variance with the code of Ethics which had been promulgated by Zoroaster as the True Faith.

That the Achaemenid monarchs themselves were for the most part religious conservatives becomes the clearer as we examine their expressions of faith or piety. It is true that until the reign of Artaxerxes Memnon (408 B.C.), Ahura Mazda (Ormuzd) is alone invoked by name, but there is nothing in this pre-eminence to imply a

¹ Her. i. 131.

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belief in the Dualistic Theory ; indeed, the collective mention of 'the other gods' is far from having an orthodox flavour. But Memnon went still further by placing the names of Mithra and Anahita by the side of the supreme deity, while his successor Ochus dedicated temples to the goddess in every great city of his empire. Anahita, the presiding genie of Fertility and more especially of Waters, occupied in the Avesta the same inferior position as Mithra. This action of the Achaemenids was therefore either oblivious of Zoroastrianism, or in deliberate revulsion from its lifeless and impersonal divinities.

The Persian court returned to its old naturalistic beliefs, but these had in the meantime undergone a profound and far-reaching transformation. Brought down in their native freshness from the highlands of Irân, they had fallen under the spell of **Chaldaean Astrology**. The ancient gods of Persia were quickly identified with Babylonian deities. Ahura himself became Bel, god of the sky ; Anahita assumed the dubious reputation of Ishtar ; and Mithra was so easily assimilated to the Sun-god, Shamash, that after a lapse of several centuries he could be regarded as of purely Babylonian origin. We shall see, however, that this confusion was not transmitted in the Mysteries,

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where the god of Light was carefully distinguished from the orb of heaven:¹ the identification so often and readily made by Roman worshippers was in direct opposition to one of the cardinal doctrines of Mithraism. It would indeed have been better for the Cult if it had escaped all the effects of Chaldaean influence, for the adulteration which it undoubtedly suffered plunged it into a mass of absurdities and contradictions.

The progress of Mithra from East to West is not easy to follow with any certainty, for not the least peculiar feature of this religion is the almost entire absence of pre-Roman monuments and inscriptions in Asia Minor and Northern Syria. That the name of the god was familiar from earliest times in **Commagene** has already been suggested; and here the temple erected by King Antiochus (69-34 B.C.) on Nimrud Dagħ perpetuates his memory to this day.

But when we essay to trace him into the neighbouring kingdoms of Pontus, Armenia, and Cappadocia, our efforts are impeded by sheer lack of materials. It is true that we hear of the presence of 'Magi' or 'Pyræthi' (Athravans) with their sacred bundle of twigs (the barsom) and their peculiar caps and mouth-mufflers (the padam);²

¹ See below, chap. v. p. 59.

² Strabo, xv. 3, 15.

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but when we examine the circumstances with which they are connected, we find that Anahita, rather than Mithra, was the foremost object of worship in these regions. That the male deity was held in high esteem is clear from the frequency with which his name recurs in the dynastic families of these petty states; but these, it must be remembered, prided themselves on their pure Iranian ancestry. Among the vast mass of the indigenous population which had from time immemorial worshipped a Mother-god (Ma) and her youthful son or lover (Atys), he naturally surrendered the place of honour to his female companion and assumed the lineaments (if not the legends) of her inferior consort. The identification cost him little, for his mysteries appear to have borrowed hardly at all from the local cults¹ with which they came in contact. Of his relations with the goddess who often shared his wanderings, it is impossible to speak with certainty. It was perhaps from her that the Rite of the Taurobolium passed into occasional practice among the followers of Mithras.²

We are now in a position to summarise the more important results of our investigation.

¹ He is identified also with the Pontic Moon-god, Men, and the Phrygian Sabazius.

² See below, chap. v. p. 45.

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(1) *Mitra* or *Mithra* was from earliest times worshipped both by the Indians and Persians as a god of light with (if any) only secondary ethical aspects. He is at this stage almost invariably coupled with another god (originally Ruler of the Sky), *Varuṇa* or *Ahura*, the two being regarded as sovereigns and co-creators of the Universe. It is in this primitive form that *Mitra* appears in Northern Mesopotamia, about the fourteenth century B.C., as a national god of the Mitanni.

(2) The Iranian *Mithra*, in the course of Persian conquests, underwent an internal and an external transformation. He became (a) the god of Truth, the warlike defender of the Righteous; and (b) an equivalent of the Babylonian *Shamash*, who dowered him with all the lore of Chaldaean astrology.

(3) The later Achaemenid monarchs, ignorant or impatient of Zoroastrianism which had degraded their favourite god into the rank of a genie, restored him to his original place by the side of *Ahura*.

(4) After the conquests and death of Alexander, *Mithra* is found in Pontus, Armenia, Cappadocia, and Commagene. The Kings of these states, who boasted of their Achaemenid descent, were careful to preserve the religion of their fathers, and dis-

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played their devotion to the god by frequently incorporating his name in their own. In this period Mithraism became connected with, but not assimilated to, the Anatolian cults of Ma and Atys, Men, Sabazius, etc.

(5) As a more general conclusion, it must be added that of the numerous episodes in the traditional career of the god, which we see depicted on the monuments, there is to be found no certain trace or memory in any of the countries through which he must have passed to Rome.

The development of the mysteries must, therefore, for the present, be ascribed to an intermediary period, which entirely escapes us: it is as distant from the days of Indra and Varuṇa as it is removed from the spirit of Zoroastrian abstraction.

Before however we consider the Mithraic legend in detail, we must follow the Cult into Europe, and trace out the story of its widespread popularity under the rule of the Caesars.

CHAPTER III

MITHRAS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

THE transition from a period which immediately followed the death of Alexander to one in which we find the Roman Republic already verging upon a Principate must seem unreal and abrupt. We have already seen why it is, at present, inevitable, but we may add at least one cause which has contributed to our ignorance.

Neither Greece, nor the countries bordering on the Aegean, nor—a fact which is stranger still—the neighbouring lands of Hellenised Syria appear to have had any relations with the Mithraic mysteries.

Rome herself, who had in 204 B.C. welcomed the Great Mother from Pessinus, who had tolerated the worship of Isis and Serapis for a whole century before the Christian Era, who had erected a temple to the Heavenly Virgin of Carthage, and had learned from Sulla the fierce features of the

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Cappadocian Bellona, Rome herself was yet in ignorance of the Persian Cult, and was to hear little of it until a century of Imperial Rule had unlocked the secrets of the Anatolian Highlands.

This general silence must, presumably, be attributed to the inaccessibility of the country in which the god was worshipped. Secure in their mountain fortresses, the Iranian princes of Asia Minor continued in unmolested content to practise the ancient rites of their forefathers. Even the first assaults of Rome failed to do more than secure a fringe of these Mithraic regions. The province of Cilicia, for instance (102 B.C.), comprised at the most a few towns along the coast: it knew little of the mountainous defiles of Olympus where the pirates tended the sacred Flame and celebrated the mysteries of Mithras.

We must note these **Pirates**, for, if we are to believe the testimony of Plutarch,¹ it was from them that the Latin world first learned the worship of the god. How or whence they received the mysteries, we do not know; but the fact that they had been fighting in the service of Mithridates may be a possible explanation of the problem. There is in any case no doubt that the Cult had taken deep root in Cilicia, since even in the third

¹ *Life of Pompey*, c. 24.

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century A.D. coins of Tarsus still bear the familiar picture of the Bull-sacrificing god.

If Plutarch's statement is correct, it would appear that Rome was slow to welcome the new-comer; for the subjugation of the pirates by Pompey took place in 67 B.C., and the earliest Mithraic dedication yet discovered was made by a freedman of the Flavian period (between 69-96 A.D.). After this, the mysteries became more familiar; and Statius (about 80 A.D.) refers in his *Thebaid*¹ to the Tauroktonous relief. Certainly, when about the same time the real invasion began, it occurred almost simultaneously in Italy and on the Danubian and Rhenish frontiers.

To describe the history of the Mithraic diffusion in any but the broadest outline would far exceed the range of so small a work. Fortunately however it possessed qualities of such striking significance, that even in a hasty survey, we can grasp the essential features of the problem.

Two main questions present themselves:—

(1) **Who brought the Mysteries to the Latin World?**

(2) **What path or paths did these Apostles of Mithras take?**

¹ *Theb.* i. 717 sqq.

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Of these questions the second will be found in a great measure to provide an answer to the first. We may therefore give it priority.

A map which is arranged to describe the distribution of the Cult may tend at first sight merely to confuse the student; but out of the apparent chaos of place-names a closer examination will reveal the progress of a single uniform movement. This movement with certain obvious, and a few probably accidental, exceptions follows definite (though geographically different) routes, and tends towards a definite goal—the frontiers.

Before we trace its course, we may dispose briefly of two divergencies such as we have mentioned. They are:—

- (1) **Ports.** (2) **Rome (and Italy).**

Of both it may be asserted with some confidence that in them could be found at one time or another all the religious sects that ever flourished in the Roman Empire.

(1) If **Sidon** and **Alexandria**, if **Panormus** and **Syracuse**, if **Carthage**, **Tarraco**, and even **Piræus** have left memorials of the mysteries, we shall recognise in this little more than the inevitable consequence of cosmopolitanism.

(2) If this can be said of the places we have

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named, how much more would it be true of **Ostia** and the **Capital** itself?

In the former there were at one period at least four shrines: the latter and its environs (Tibur, Praeneste, and the rest) teemed with Mithraic devotees.

Elsewhere in the interior of **Italy**, in Lucania, in Apulia, among the Aequi, the Persian god was commemorated; both the Cassian and Flaminian Ways were dotted with his monuments.

For all this, as we shall see, Italy stands rather in a category of its own: the triumph of the mysteries was enacted in another part of the Empire.

We return then to the chief channels of the Mithraic advance, and of these there were two—(I) the Port of **Aquileia**, at the head of the Adriatic; and (II) the mouth and valley of the **Rhone**.

(I) For our purpose, the first of these, **Aquileia**, is specially important. From it roads branched off (*a*) to Tridentum (Trente) in the valley of the Adige, (*b*) to the coast towns of Dalmatia, (*c*) to Noricum, and (*d*) to the Danubian provinces of Pannonia, Moesia, and Dacia. In following each of these routes, we pursue at the same time the path taken by Mithraic immigrants.

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- (a) All up the valley of the **Adige**, along the road leading over the Brenner Pass to Augusta Vindelicorum (Augsburg), traces of the Cult are to be found at least as far as **Mauls**.
- (b) The evidences of Mithraic devotion are scattered along the Dalmatian coast as far as Epidaurus. From Naron, the valley of the Naro carried them to the modern **Konjica**, which possesses a unique monument of the highest importance.¹
- (c) Along the valley of the Sontius (Isonzo) the Mysteries, probably, attained the upper reaches of the Drave. We find them established at Teurnia and at **Virunum**, the largest town in Noricum, which boasted at least two sanctuaries in the third century.
- (d) Finally we approach the Danubian highways, which branched off at **Aemona**. The upper route carried Mithraism with it to **Poetovio** (Pettau), and finally to the great fortress of *Aquincum* (Buda); the lower scattered it down the valley of the Save to its juncture with the Danube at **Viminacium**: on both roads its course can be tracked by monuments and inscriptions.

¹ See below, chap. vi. p. 71.

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In the case of the *Danubian garrisons* the facts can be stated briefly: from the Black Sea to Vindobona (Vienna) they proclaim with one voice the triumph of the new religion. In **Dacia**, and especially at its chief town, **Sarmizethusa**, the mysteries claimed innumerable adherents. In this province, where the name of Christianity was never heard, the Persian Mithras ruled supreme. Lastly we may note that **Thrace** also could not resist the newcomer: we can follow the Cult to Serdica (Sophia) and even over the present Ichtiman Pass into the valley of the Hebrus (Maritza). Truly was the god styled Invincible (*ἀνίκητος*, *Invictus*)!

(II) As on the Danube, so on the **Rhine**; we can trace the mysteries from Arelate (Arles) up the valley of the Rhone to Lugudunum (Lyons): the chain is weak here but unbroken, and when we reach the Rhenish frontier the diffusion becomes dense once more. Throughout the **Agri Decumates**, in the Neckar valley and especially in the Taunus between the Limes and the river Main the shrines of Mithras are not only exceedingly numerous but have produced some of the finest bas-reliefs yet discovered. To enumerate

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the sites would be tedious as well as useless. We mention only **Heddernheim** (civitas Taunensium), **Stockstadt** on the Main, **Neuenheim** on the Neckar, and **Osterburken** almost due east of it on the Limes.

In addition to these thickly studded localities, a series of Mithraic sites stretches along the Rhine from Raurica (Augst) through **Argentoratum** (Strasburg) to **Castra Vetera** (Xanten).

At Pons Saravi (Sarreburg), on the line of communication between Strasburg and the Moselle Valley, an important shrine has been discovered, while even at Geneva a soldier has recorded his devotion to Mithras.

We pass now to **Gesoriacum** (Boulogne), where remains of the Cult have been found ; and thence, in the natural course, to **Londinium**, which once boasted a Mithraeum.

The distribution of monuments in **Britain** is peculiarly interesting because it illustrates the essential feature of the Mithraic diffusion. While 'Municipia' like Calleva (Silchester) and Venta Silurum (Caerwent) have revealed no traces of the mysteries, military posts such as **Deva** (Chester), **Isca** (Caerleon), and **Eboracum** (York), were clearly familiar with them ; and almost every station on, and even beyond, the 'Roman

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Wall' contained its shrine and its band of devotees. Thus we find Vindobala, Borcovicus, Amboglanna, Petrianae, Luguvallium, and Bremenium; altogether a remarkable contrast between the Imperial and the municipal conditions of life in the Roman West.

This point may be especially emphasised, for it meets us again in the untroubled provinces of **Gaul**, where a few scattered monuments remain to record the devotion of isolated individuals: it meets us in **Spain**, where only a military colony like Emerita or a legionary station such as Iria Flavia felt the influence of the foreign faith: finally, it occurs in even more marked a form in **Africa**.

Here the military garrisons of Diana, Lamboesis, and Mascula in Numidia, of Sitifis and Timzuin in Mauretania are, if we except a few littoral towns, our only memorials of the presence of Mithraism in these parts.

This we may repeat is the peculiar feature about its diffusion. At one quite definite point throughout the Empire its advance is stopped; its monuments become rarer; in some cases they disappear. And it is in the peaceful, the more civilised, we may even say the more stagnant provinces that this check and this disappearance

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occur. Boetica, 'Africa,' the Three Gauls, Narbonensis, the South of Britain, Macedonia, Achaia, all these regions seem to lie outside the range of the mysteries.

We might explain this significant fact in one of two ways. We might say (1) that the countries in question rejected the alien intruder, or (2) that they never came into contact with those who proclaimed him.

The first of these hypotheses must be regarded as untenable. The evidences of the Cult show quite indisputably that a large majority of Mithraists were (as we should expect) the Asiatics who brought the faith to the Empire. Countless monuments have been discovered which owe their origin to these immigrants: indeed we may assert that wherever these men went, they left behind them a record of their presence which the antagonism of their new neighbours could despise but not destroy.

We must fall back, therefore, on our second supposition. Mithraism was confined to certain parts of the Empire, because in those parts and in those parts only were its adherents to be found. Wherever they settled, they established and diffused the mysteries. In some cases, by the movements of individuals, it may have been to a

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considerable distance; but as an almost universal rule, the centre of the Cult is to be looked for in its original resting-place.

How came it then that this human diffusion was of so partial and distinctive a character? How came the Mithraists in certain provinces of the Empire only?

Briefly the answer to this is that they did not merely come: they were *sent*. This brings us naturally to the question which we have postponed—

Who brought the mysteries to the Latin World?

CHAPTER IV

THE FOLLOWERS OF MITHRAS

AN acute observer¹ has remarked that while Mithraism seems to have followed in the steps of those countless deities in whom the people of Syria delighted—the Jupiters of Doliche, Emesa, and Heliopolis (Baalbec); the Dea Syria; Aziz; the Bonus Puer; and the like—the Phrygian cult of the Great Mother and Attis, which had been brought so early to the capital of the Roman Republic, pursued a course through the provinces which diverged at every point from that of its religious rivals. Perhaps the most conspicuous difference lies in the relations of the municipal authorities to these alien invaders. The popularity of the ‘Mother of the Gods’ in provincial municipalities is attested on every hand, especially in those regions (*e.g.* the Gauls) where the Syrian

¹ Toutain, *Les Cultes Païens dans l'Emp. Rom.*, II. c. iii. p. 111.

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and Persian cults are noticeably absent. Not only the municipal priests and officials (duumviri, aediles, seviri, Augustales, etc.), but frequently the whole body of citizens have testified their loyalty to the goddess and her youthful consort. With Mithraism (and, we may add, with the cults of Syria, which do not here concern us) the case is far otherwise. Dedications by decuriones (municipal senators) do indeed occur; but it is significant that they are generally found in towns or 'colonies,' which existed in close connection with the military or civil administration of the Empire.¹ There are good reasons to suppose that many, if not most, of the devotees in these cases were veterans who had settled down by the side of their old camp to spend the remainder of their lives in the less arduous duties of municipal politics.

We are thus brought back to our original position. It has been suggested above that the diffusion of Mithraism was linked not with the provincial or municipal life, but with the *Imperial needs* of the Latin World. These needs, it is perhaps hardly necessary to say, were twofold—the **Army** and the **Civil Services**.

For both of these Rome demanded *men*; and

¹ *E.g.* Aquileia, Carnuntum, Aquincum, Viminacium.

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to obtain them she exploited those provinces of Eastern Asia Minor and North Syria, in which the cult of Mithras had grown to maturity.

After the incorporation of Cappadocia, W. Pontus, and Commagene (under Tiberius, Nero, and Vespasian respectively), a flood of recruits and slaves began to pour into the ranks of the legions and the various government bureaux. To both they brought new energy, new ideas, and, what is for us the most important, a *new Creed*.

These, then, are the lines along which we must follow the propagators of Mithraism. But a word must first be said on another possible class of devotee—the **Merchants**.

The influence of this class, if not negligible, must have been extremely slight. In Gaul, for instance, where the traders formed 'a particularly dense population,'¹ Mithraism is conspicuously absent. Even in ports such as Aquileia and Senia on the Dalmatian Littoral, where we might expect to find evidences of their devotion, we meet instead the names of Imperial agents or legionary veterans. It is amongst these, we must conclude, that the chief propagators of the Cult are to be sought.

It is easy to understand how thoroughly the

¹ Cumont, *Relig. Orient. dans le Paganisme Rom.*, p. 160.

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new religion could permeate the **Army**. The constant intercourse between legion and legion, the continual movement of troops, the transfer of officers and even of small detachments, were alone sufficient to have produced this effect. The details of the process can only be studied at great length, but a few indications of its character may be noted here.

At **Carnuntum** (Petronel) on the Danube, the worship of Mithras was celebrated in three shrines. To this garrison fortress, Vespasian had in 71 or 72 A.D. transferred the Fifteenth legion (**Apollinaris**) from its long service in the East. Its ranks, recruited no doubt very largely from Cappadocia, harboured the mysteries and transported them to Europe. From its new home the cult radiated in all directions. Not only did it infect the legions which ultimately succeeded the Fifteenth at Carnuntum, but it gained adherents in Scarbantia and Vindobona, and was carried by a prefect of the Fifteenth to the Third legion (**Augusta**) at Lambaesis.

Aquincum (Buda) was another of the prominent Mithraic centres. It was the headquarters of the Second Legion (**Adiutrix**), which had been formed by Vespasian from the fleet at Ravenna and contained a large percentage of Asiatics. Here

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there were at least five shrines in honour of the god.

Other legions, such as the Fifth (Macedonica), and the Eleventh (Claudia), which had both seen service in the East under Titus, returned home like the Fifteenth with the new leaven of Mithraism in their midst.

In Germany the Thirtieth (Ulpia victrix) soon learned the mysteries; and even the remote British garrisons were not exempt from the contagion. At **Londinium** and **Isca** men of the Second (Augusta), at **Vindobala** (Rutchester) of the Sixth, have shown themselves adherents of the Invincible god.

Finally in addition to the legions, many of the auxiliary 'alae' and 'cohortes'—especially, it would seem, those raised in Pannonia, Noricum, or Dalmatia—did much in spreading the Cult in Numidia, Mauretania, Dacia, Germany, etc.

So far we have dealt only with the military side of the Mithraic diffusion. But if the martial aspect of the Cult was well suited to such an environment, there still remain a large class of devotees to whom the glamour of a warlike religion must have failed completely in its appeal. Among those who worshipped Mithras the **Private**

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and Imperial Slaves were by no means the least numerous or the least devoted.

In **Italy** and the **Capital** itself, the dedications are in many cases to be traced to the privately owned servants who were needed to superintend the households, or to exploit the '*latifundia*' of wealthy Romans (*actor villicus praediorum*). That these men, like their brothers in the government offices, were of oriental origin is generally obvious from their names—Euchetas, Sagaris, etc. No doubt they had met the same fate of expatriation; and even their present *status* was hardly different from that of many slaves and freedmen who worked as **Agents** on the Imperial estates in Italy, Noricum, and elsewhere (*actuarii*), and have left us memorials of their faith and their prayers for the 'Divine House' of the Caesars.

Such dedications are not uncommon in Rome and Italy; but the greatest number is to be found in that group of provinces which included Rhaetia, Noricum, and Dalmatia, as well as the Pannoniae and Moesiae in a huge customs area, created for the exaction of the Vectigal Illyrici. The posts connected with this 'douane,' as well as those concerned with the '**Right of Trading**' (*portorium publicum*), or the pressing problem of '**Transport**,'

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were often filled by Mithraists, whose presence along the various highroads and in the Dalmatian coast towns is thus sufficiently explained.

But in addition to these agents, a large number of **Fiscal Officers** (*dispensatores*) were required to superintend the revenues of the Imperial treasury. They, or their subordinates, introduced the Cult into Noricum (which was a patrimony of the Caesars) in company no doubt with the numerous band of exiles who were busied in exploiting the **Iron Mines** of that province.

It will be seen that a large variety of causes contributed to the diffusion of the mysteries. In **Dacia** we find an almost complete summary of these. Dacia possessed gold mines: it contained troops: and not only was it filled with the various 'civil servants' we have mentioned, but it had been completely repopulated by Trajan 'from the whole Roman world,' a large proportion of the new inhabitants being transported from Asia Minor. The loss of this province in 275 A.D. must have been a heavy blow to the Persian Mysteries.

On the German, British, and African diffusion a few words will suffice. In all three cases, the chief instrument of propagation was the army, although at the garrison town of **Mascula** in

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Numidia the slave of an Imperial tax collector has so far provided the only Mithraic dedication. There is, at any rate, nothing in these areas which contradicts our main contention.

Mithraism was brought from its obscure retreat in Asia Minor by men who had known and practised it from childhood. Unlike the cult of the Phrygian Mother, which had been summoned by the Senate itself and had for centuries enjoyed the esteem of the older Roman provinces, it came unrecognised, or suspected by all save those who bore it with them to console their exile. How far the Mithraist sought for converts is doubtful. In the 'Camaraderie' of a legion, many might be drawn towards a creed which seemed to offer some hope of everlasting life to men who lived in daily peril, and had learned to expect nothing but oblivion beyond the grave. Perhaps in some 'station' of the customs area a humble agent may have taught the mysteries to his superior. We may indulge in these speculations at our pleasure, but unfortunately the evidences are insufficient to confirm them.

As the mysteries became more familiar, their identity with the Imperial interests must have struck the politic mind of the Caesars, whose open adherence found many imitators in the highest

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offices of the state. In addition to a long list of *virī clarissimi* and commanders of legions, we find governors of Noricum and Numidia, with Legati of Dacia, Upper Pannonia, and Britain, among the list of the converted.

This popularity of the Cult dates from the time of the **Antonines**. Countless prayers to Mithras for their safety are to be found recorded in all parts of the Latin world. But the zeal for the mysteries was kindled into a blaze under the rule of **Commodus**.

He, as we know from Lampridius, professed an ardent devotion for all those oriental cults which swarmed in the streets and purlieus of the capital; and it was he who, as we shall have occasion to repeat, 'polluted the rites of Mithras with a genuine homicide.'¹

Under the **Severi** the enthusiasm showed no signs of waning: indeed, it has been justly remarked² that Mithraism formed the backbone of that religious syncretism which issued from the learned circles of the Syrian Empresses. Caracalla himself accorded his favour to the mysteries, for he allowed a large Spelaeum to be excavated under his famous Baths. It is certain,

¹ Commodus, c. 9 (see below, chap. vii. p. 85).

² Réville, *La Rel. à Rome sous les Sévères*, chap. iii.

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moreover, that in the lifetime of his father, the Domus Augustana supported a sanctuary with a 'private chaplain.'

After this the lack of dated inscriptions becomes a serious drawback. The evidence, though meagre, tends to show that Mithraism flourished through the reigns of Elagabalus (who no doubt despised it), of Severus Alexander (who perhaps regarded it with his impartial spirit of eclectic zeal), through the troubled years that followed from Gordianus III. (238-244 A.D.) to Gallus (251-253 A.D.). Then follows a silence of about fifty years, due perhaps to the rival attractions of Aurelian's Palmyrene Sun Cult, which must have monopolised the affections of many vacillating spirits.

When next we find the proofs both of Imperial and popular devotion it is in the time of **Diocletian**, who with the other Jovian and Herculean Emperors restored a shrine at Carnuntum to the glory of Mithras the 'Favourer of their Empire' (*circ.* 307 A.D.).

The Persian Flame again shone brightly for a time, to be damped but not extinguished by the first triumph of Christianity under Constantine. During the reign of **Julian**, the last Mithraic Emperor, and for a score of years after him,

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Paganism made a final effort to overcome its rival. All creeds and philosophies were joined in alliance against the common enemy; but this attempt seems only to have been made by a small circle of distinguished families (the Olympii, Praetextati, etc.). The expiring struggle was in vain, for the firm hand of Theodosius smothered the last flicker of the dying fire (*circ.* 383 A.D.).

Such in brief is the history of these Persian mysteries. Propagated by slaves and legionaries, they found a welcome in the houses of the noblest families, and even in the Imperial court itself. Wherein, we may ask, lay the secret of their appeal? Was there not something in the rites and doctrines of Mithraism which challenged and satisfied the spiritual longings of a world weary of despair? We can scarcely doubt it; and this is where the **Monuments** of the Cult should be able to help us. The task of examining them is not as simple as it appears, for it will be necessary to penetrate the crust of Hellenistic thought and expression beneath which the old Iranian myths lie buried and forgotten.

There is much in this part of our subject which can only be reconstructed by conjecture: there is much also concerning which a frank confession of

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ignorance is the wisest course: but the study of Mithraic mythology will lead us at least some distance towards a clearer comprehension of the Faith taught and symbolised in the sacred Cave.



FIG. 2.—MITHRAIC ALTAR-PIECE FROM WALBROOK. From *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. i. (1911), plate xxiv.; and Cumont, *M.M.M.*, vol. ii. p. 389, fig. 364.

CHAPTER V

THE MONUMENTS AND MYTHOLOGY OF MITHRAISM

A SURVEY of the Mithraic monuments must of necessity begin with a description of that which contained them, the **Temple** or '**Cave**' itself.

This, as its name indicates (*spelaeum*, *specus*, etc.), was intended to simulate a rock-hewn vaulted chamber, and was in many cases actually constructed underground. Where (as, *e.g.*, at Ostia) this was for some reason impracticable, the level of the neighbouring chambers was artificially raised, and a short descent suggested the subterranean character of the rites.

Entrance to the **Sanctuary** (*crypta*) was only to be gained through a series of intermediate rooms, which, as the inscriptions tell us, were often screened on the outside by a **Colonnade** or **Porch** (*Porticus*). These rooms included a **Vestibule** (*Pronaos*), and a **Changing Room**

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(*apparatorium*), where the actors in the mystic drama put on the peculiar dresses of their several grades. The angles formed by the projecting walls and doorways of these chambers could be cleverly arranged to shut out all sight of the sanctuary door until the initiate actually stood before it.¹

The main design of the **Mithraeum** itself seems hardly ever to have varied. Once seen, even in a state of dilapidation, it is easily and quickly recognised. The eye is immediately caught by the **Benches** or platforms (called now for convenience '*podia*'), which run from end to end of the chapel on either side of the central **Aisle**. In width about 4 ft., they stand 2 ft. high in the centre of the spelaeum, but slope gradually backwards to its lateral walls. Sometimes they are on a level with the door: sometimes they rise above it, and are ascended by a few steps from the floor of the 'nave.' Not infrequently a ledge was left along the whole of their length to support lamps and statues, and thus free the central aisle of any encumbrance.

This **Aisle** (*Cella*), which was about 8 ft. broad, was, it must be presumed, employed for the

¹ *E.g.* in the Ostian Mithraeum mentioned above (M.M.M. ii. p. 240).

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mystic masquerade, and the other services of the Cult. At Ostia, seven semicircles inscribed upon its pavement prove that the Mithraic priests were in the habit of invoking the Planets from their special 'stations' in this '*cella*.' Here also took place those animal-sacrifices to which we shall refer below.

We must note here an important point with regard to the Mithraic Chapels. The vast majority of them were so small as to provide room for a bare fifty worshippers, while even the largest could scarcely accommodate a hundred. This fact (which incidentally explains the presence of several *Spelaea* in the same town) necessarily prohibited the celebration of any rite, like the *Taurobolium*, which required for its success a far more extensive stage than the *cellae* could afford.

Passing down the aisle between the rows of kneeling worshippers, the officiating priest took his stand before the **Apse** (*absidata*, *exedra*) in which the sanctuary terminated. In it stood the grand **Bas-relief**¹ of the Bull-sacrifice, before which were ranged two or more altars; while to right and left stood the statues of two **Torch-bearers** (*Dadophori*). In some shrines the sacred Relief was shut off from the rest of the *Crypta*

¹ See Fig. 1.

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by a kind of Chancel-rail; in some, again, a strange **Lion-headed** figure was to be found, carefully concealed behind a screen of stone or a veil.¹

Finally, the '*ornamenta*' of the average *spelaeum* included a stoop or urn of **Water**. Great importance was attached to the presence of the Element, and wherever possible the Chapel was constructed in close proximity to a spring or well.

We have now completed our survey of the Temple itself, and can turn to the details of its contents. Of these the great **Bas-relief** first claims our attention. The scene depicted on it was a strange one.

Under the rocky vault of a cavern, the young and beautiful god has forced his quarry to the ground. Kneeling on its back, and pressing his right foot upon its hind leg, he drags back its head by grasping a horn or fixing his fingers in the nostrils, while he plunges his knife into the neck above the right shoulder. His dress on the Reliefs is almost always the same: he is clad in the tunic and breeches which typified 'Asia' to

¹ In a Mithraeum at Heddernheim (M.M.M. ii. p. 375) a screen of basalt was pierced with an opening through which the figure could be inspected.

A dedication of 'Veils bearing the symbols of the Lord (Domini)' (C.I.L. vi. 946) is certainly open to this interpretation.

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the Western world, with a short cloak which floats out behind him. On his flowing locks is the familiar 'Phrygian' cap (*pileus*). His face is often turned to the spectator, or over the right shoulder, and wears an indescribable expression of mingled grief, exaltation, and fear. Other actors take part in the scene: in addition to the **Dadophori**, whose rôle appears to be that of melancholy onlookers, the **Sun** himself looks down upon the Sacrifice and darts a ray into the gloom of the cavern. A **Dog** and a **Snake** advance from opposite directions to drink the spurting blood, while a **Scorpion** (sometimes with an ant) absorbs¹ the seed of the victim. Meanwhile, perched on a rocky height, or even upon the billowing mantle of the god, a **Crow** sits watching the mysterious scene.

The group, as here depicted,² is subject to various kinds of modification. On some reliefs a **Lion** is present, either suspended head downwards over an urn or disputing its possession with the snake. The Sun, who is usually seen on the spectator's right above the vault of the cave, is balanced on the left by the Moon: the two are

¹ The scorpion is not *poisoning* the seed. The invariable position of his tail, which is not arched but relaxed, shows this clearly.

² See Fig. 1.

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sometimes represented in their respective chariots, the former climbing, the latter descending, the Heavens.

A great deal of speculation has been expended on the meaning of this sacrificial scene, especially on the subordinate characters in it. Are the Dog, the Snake, the Scorpion to be explained astronomically; and, if so, in what peculiar sense? Or, again, is the struggle of Elements concealed—as Cumont suggests¹—under the symbolism of the Lion (Fire), the Bowl (Water), and the Snake (Earth)? Neither hypothesis can be considered quite satisfactory, and an appeal to Zoroastrianism is scarcely more attractive. If the snake and the scorpion are here as the evil creations of Ahriman, what are we to say of the dog, that most beneficent creature of Ormuzd, who is frankly employed in the same occupation as his supposed enemies, *i.e.* in absorbing ‘virtue’ from the dying Bull! It is possible, of course, that the sculptor mistook the meaning of the symbols, for the group as a whole can certainly be interpreted in the light of the later ‘Zoroastrian’ beliefs. In this enigmatical scene there is yet one more feature which, strange as it is, gives us the very clue for which we were looking. The Bull’s tail

¹ M.M.M. i. 101 *sqq.*

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(sometimes also the blood flowing from the wound) shapes itself into ears of corn!

On the back of the Heddernheim Relief there is a unique scene which develops the same idea. Standing behind the dead animal are two figures, one of whom (the Sun) shows his companion (Mithras) a large cluster of grapes. The two Dadophori (as usual, on either side) have laid down their torches and are holding baskets filled with fruit. The general significance of these groups is obvious. **The Death of the Bull brings Life and Fertility to the Earth.**

There can be little doubt that we are dealing here with the same Iranian myth which has been preserved, under Zoroastrian guise, in the Parsi 'Genesis,' the Bundahish. There we read¹ that at the material creation Ahriman caused the Primeval Ox to waste away, and that on its death 'owing to the vegetable principle proceeding from every limb of the Ox, fifty and five species of grain and twelve species of medicinal plants grew forth' . . . 'from the blood the grape vine. . . . On this account wine abounds with blood.'

The seed of the Ox (as the same source tells us) was taken to the 'Moon-Station,'² and from it

¹ Bund. iii. 17; x. ; xiv. 2.

² A small scene showing the Bull in a Crescent Moon seems

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sprang 'the manifold species of animals.' So on the Heddernheim Relief the upper part is covered with animals of every description.

With the Parsis and their Avestan ancestors, the Mithraists knew the 'valuableness of the Ox,' and the benefits derived so mysteriously from its slaughter. The point—and it is a very essential one—on which they disagreed was the identity not of the victim but of its destroyer. It is not the Spirit of Evil who, somewhat paradoxically, performs this deed of good: it is Mithras himself, who thus fulfils his benign mission upon the earth. In this it is probable that Mithraism has *preserved* the primitive, pre-Avestan form of the legend, for other details of the god's terrestrial career have their roots far back in the Aryan past. It is with these that we shall now proceed to deal.

The Sacrifice of the Bull formed the principal feature of the Reliefs; but this was primarily because it was the culmination of a number of heroic exploits. These **Exploits**, together with others not immediately connected with Mithras, were grouped in pictures round the central scene, and, like it, varied in nature and number according

to indicate the Moon as its original home. Cf. Porph., *De Ant. Nymphi.*, c. 18, ταῦρος μὲν σελήνη . . .

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to the individual caprices of the sculptor. If the myths depicted have taken on a Hellenistic or Roman guise the fact need not surprise us. The slaughter of the Bull itself was copied from a 'Sacrificing Victory' (*Νίκη βοθυτοῦσα*), which adorned the Temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis. The Dadophori, too, borrowed their dress, and (perhaps) their melancholy, from a common type of funerary Attis. In like manner, the subordinate incidents present us with pictures of the **Fates**, of the **Abdication of Saturn in favour of Jupiter**, and of the latter's **Struggle with the Titans**. The *Persian Atlas*, who on some reliefs begins the series of scenes, is perhaps an exception to this method.

The first appearance of Mithras seems to have followed closely on the '*Titanomachia*,' or, rather, its Iranian equivalent. His **Birth** was itself of peculiar importance in the Cult. He rises, as a naked child, from a **Parent Rock** (*Petra genetrīx*), holding in his hands a knife and a torch. In close connection with this scene, which is perhaps the most frequent of all and was often honoured with a separate monument, is another which represents a bearded man in an attitude of repose or *slumber*. We are fortunately able to identify him with the **Ocean**.

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The connection between the three scenes is not at first sight obvious. The Bundahish, it is true, narrates an assault of Ahriman and his Demons upon Heaven, which took place *before* the material creation; but its account of that creation is, as we have seen in the instance of the Bull, purely Zoroastrian or Dualistic. Mithraism however inculcated a different doctrine: and this has been preserved by Porphyry,¹ who speaks of Mithras as 'the Maker and Father of all things,' and the Cave as 'an image of the world, of which Mithras was the Demiurge.' The highest Mithraic grade, as we shall see, was that of Father (*Pater*), which no doubt, in its original significance, alluded to this legend.

We are thus, at the outset, face to face with an undeniable **Cosmogony**, of which our ignorance is almost complete! If any doubt on the subject still remains, it should be dispelled, when we remember that the name of Ahura never occurs on Mithraic inscriptions, and that Ahriman has apparently become a god of the lower world, who may be placated by prayers and offerings. The Zoroastrian Dualism is destroyed: it is Mithras, and Mithras alone, who fills the canvas of our picture.

¹ Porph., *De Ant. Nymph.*, c. 5-6.



FIG. 3.—SCULPTURE FROM BORCOVIOUS (HOUSESTEADS).
Cumont, M.M.M., vol. ii. p. 395, fig. 315.

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Whence then did he come? We would suggest that he rose as the other primeval deities of the Aryans—as Erös, as Agni, as Brahma, rose—from a golden germ (*hiranya garbhas*),¹ or a **Cosmic Egg**, which lay in the bosom of the **Sleeping Ocean**. On a sculpture found at Borcovicus (Housesteads)² the boy-god is seen within an *Oval* aperture, rising from the Rock of which a part, also *oval* in section, rests upon his head. On the Neuenheim Relief, we see him at his birth holding a spherical object which may represent the world, of which he was the Father and Fashioner.

A Christian writer of the third century³ has asked in very bad hexameters who it was who created the Rock. 'Vos de istis date priorem.' The question is pertinent but at present unanswerable. All that can be affirmed is that Mithras was *not* regarded as omnipotent, for having created the *inanimate* world, he was unable to supply it out of his own resources with *vegetable and animal life*.

If we look again at the old Aryan mythology, we find these forces of life and fertility typified now under the symbol of the *waters*, now under that of a herd of *cows*. These, it was thought, were shut

¹ R. V. x. 82. Laws of Manu, i. 7 *sq.* Aristophanes, *Birds*, 693 *sq.*

² See Fig. 3.

³ Commodian, *Instruct*, i. 13.

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up in a 'gloomy reservoir'¹ or imprisoned in a rocky stable² by the Demon Vritra. The god, Indra, whose exploits may have been borrowed by Mithras at a very early date, is constantly invoked as he who by killing Vritra precipitates the enclosed waters upon the earth or releases the imprisoned kine.

On the Mithraic reliefs both symbols appear to have been used.³ Mithras is seen shooting an arrow into an overhanging rock (which recalls 'the tortuous cloud engulfed by Vritra') and producing from it a torrent of water in a manner curiously reminiscent of Moses. But this exploit, though it seems to have been popular, yielded in importance to the **Episode of the Bull**.

In this Story of the Bull the primitive nature of the Mithraic theology is manifested even more clearly. The god is first seen in the branches of a tree, apparently on the look out for his prey. The Bull is in the safe shelter of its stable, but Mithra contrives to elude its shepherd guardian (cf. Hercules and the shepherd Eurytion in the story of Geryon's oxen, which, we shall see, is relevant), and compels the animal to break cover.⁴ A wild pursuit ensues. The Hero-god,

¹ R. V. i. 54.

² R. V. i. 32.

³ See Fig. 1.

⁴ By burning its stable?

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clasping his quarry round the neck, is at first carried away by its headlong rush: his feet leave the ground, and he literally flies through the air. At last his valour and perseverance are rewarded: the beast is overcome and submits to being mounted or led by its captor. But, *for some reason*, Mithras is little satisfied with this method of progress. First he flings the animal round his shoulders and carries it in the well-known attitude of the 'Hermes Criophoros' or the 'Good Shepherd': then, as he nears his Cave, he grasps its hind legs and drags it backwards into the place of Sacrifice where with glances of mingled fear and triumph he consummates the Demiurgic Act.

So strange a mixture of savage cunning and heroic strength betrays the pre-Zoroastrian origin of this tale. It recalls the precocious thefts of the infant Hermes: it stirs memories of the 'imprisoned kine,' and the vengeance of Indra on the thief: above all, it reminds us of the story of Geryon's oxen, and the craftiness and doom of Cacus. In that familiar legend we find three things—a cave, a theft, a peculiar subterfuge. Mithraism has preserved them all, even to the detail of the 'reversed tracks.' But who is the thief? Mithras. No longer is it the evil demon who has stolen and is forced to disgorge his prey:

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it is the god himself who is the culprit! Nay more he glories in his own shame, and hands down to his initiates the very title that declares his infamy. He is the **Bull-Stealing God** (ὁ βουκλόπος θεός).

How came it that so strange a term was given by the Mithraists to this primeval legend? We can offer no explanation. Perhaps, indeed, we have here the earliest version of the story, which in other lands was transformed by the hand of enlightenment and religious propriety. However this may be, we can now understand the meaning of that peculiar expression on the features of Mithras at the moment of sacrifice; and we can also, to some extent, arrive at the significance of the whole episode.

The long pursuit and wearisome return of the hunter was called by the Initiated the **Transit of the God** (*Transitus dei*); and when we connect this fact with the repeated occurrence of the Signs of the Zodiac, half of which are often seen in *reversed* order, we can scarcely avoid the conclusion that, in the myth of the Transit, we have a description of the Sun's annual advance and retreat along the Ecliptic. His 'retrograde' passage through the last six signs ended at the winter solstice on Dec. 25th, which was from all time considered as his birthday (*Natalis invicti*). The

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twelve Mithraic 'tests'¹ may have existed as a means whereby the neophyte could imitate the trials experienced by his god.

The only difficulty—and it is not a serious one—is that, in the Romano-Persian Mysteries at any rate, Mithras was revered as an entirely distinct personage from the Sun, who is actually described as his ally (*sol socius*). The reliefs themselves inform us of the fact.

We see Mithras pursuing the chariot of the sun god. He overtakes it and forces its occupant to descend. A third scene shows the Sun uncrowned and stripped of his raiment, kneeling in humility before his conqueror, who makes a treaty with him either by baptism or the effusion of blood.

After this the two deities, foes no longer, celebrate their union with a last banquet, and ascend together in the Sun-Chariot over the waters from which Mithras had originally sprung into being.

We can judge from these incidents how easily the Sun god might be identified with his Conqueror, so that even in the later days of the mysteries, the distinction is hardly to be observed in Mithraic epigraphy, and was probably never familiar to the outer world.

Returning then for a moment to the story of

¹ See below, chap. vii. p. 83.

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the Bull, we have yet to determine its place in the Mithraic **Cosmogony**. The forces of life, the Mithraist probably said, are, as we now see them, subjected to an annual death and an annual resuscitation: the two are necessarily connected as cause and effect. But in the Beginning it was not so. Unless the Bull had once been stolen and sacrificed, those forces—which it alone possessed—would never have reached the earth at all. (They would have remained in the ‘Moon-Station’?) Thus Mithras by a theft and a murder saved mankind and all things living from extinction.

This doctrine, we must admit, is conjectural, but it is based simply on a logical consideration of the facts.

Before leaving our study of the monuments, we must briefly examine those to which only a passing notice has so far been paid, the **Dadophori** and the **Lion-Headed God**.

Of these, the former may represent Night and Day, Cold and Heat, Winter and Summer, Death and Life. These are mere guesses: indeed all that we know of them is that they formed a mystic trinity with Mithras (τριπλάσιος *M*). Even their names Cautes and Cautopates (the former of the uplifted, the latter of the drooping

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torch) remain at present unexplained. Their almost invariable presence argues a vital connection with the arcana of the mysteries, but their habitual impassivity robs this assumption of any value.

The **Lion God** is, if possible, an even more mysterious figure. He is generally represented with four wings and the head of a lion, although more artistic sculptors have softened the crudity of this effect by placing a small lion's head on the chest of an entirely human figure. Other details are often added: a snake whose coils envelop the god; signs of the Zodiac engraved upon his breast; the sceptre and thunderbolt of Jupiter; the keys (of the gates of Death and Birth?); sometimes the pine cone of Attis; the pincers of Vulcan; etc. A figure so surcharged with celestial attributes, so carefully shielded from vulgar eyes, must have played an important, if not a prominent, part in the Mysteries. Yet, here again, we are compelled to take refuge in conjecture. Thus, despite the fact that the name never occurs in inscriptions, it is now widely assumed that the god represents the Persian Kronos; that he is the Zervan or 'Unlimited Time,' father of Ormuzd and Ahriman, whose worship, though no doubt of some antiquity, was

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only formally authorised by King Yezdgerd in the fifth cent. A.D. It would be idle in so brief a survey to discuss further a point which is as yet completely unproved;¹ but it may be added that the Saturn-Jupiter incident, found on a few reliefs, may represent a somewhat similar surrender of authority made by Zervan to Ormuzd, the Greek thunderbolt taking the place of the sacrificial Barsom.

Whatever the doctrine underlying this rare scene may have been, it certainly did not obtrude itself in the mysteries; and we can summarise the distinctively 'Mithraic' mythology without it.

That this in its essentials was a **Cosmogony**, is, we believe, unquestionable. It explained to the initiated the Origin of the World, and the reasons for revering Mithras as its Father, Saviour, and God. It knew nothing of **One** 'at whose creative fiat, all things were first made': rather it recalled a tale of trickery, of arduous effort, of death beneath the knife.

With its spiritual application as contained in the Inmost Sanctuary of Mithraism, we shall deal hereafter: but we must observe at this point that the story as a cosmogony is incomplete: it omits

¹ It must be remembered that 'Zervanism' proper was a logical revulsion to monotheism from that dualist teaching of which the Mysteries themselves bear little trace.

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the **Creation of Man**. If this was included in the sacrifice of the Bull, why is there no indication of the fact? Life, it is true, emerges from the dead, but it is not human life; it is the life of animals and certain plants. Man, in fact, scarcely figures upon the monuments at all.¹ For this curious omission we must seek some explanation. Without demanding from a mythology of such antiquity a complete and logical account of the Creation, we may yet ask ourselves whether this omission may not have been intentional, whether, that is to say, a belief of so fundamental a nature can have been absent from Mithraic theology, even if it did not, for some reason, appear on Mithraic monuments.

With this interesting question we propose to deal when we examine the mystic and spiritual side of the Cult;² but it would be premature to discuss it before we have grasped the 'outward and visible' aspects of Mithraism more completely.

We shall proceed then to consider the **Organisation of the Mysteries**, the social and liturgical framework upon which they were constructed, and, not least of all, the chief characteristics of the worshippers who filled the Chapels of the god.

¹ Two suppliant figures who drink the 'Water from the Rock' (see above, p. 56) are not a real solution of the difficulty.

² See chap. vii. p. 86 *sq.*

CHAPTER VI

THE EXTERNALS OF MITHRAISM

THE early struggles of Mithraism in the new world of Roman life have left no history behind them. Its very nature as a secret society must have rendered it an object of suspicion to the authorities, and forced it to adopt some policy of self-defence.

Perhaps, as Cumont suggests,¹ the Faithful constituted themselves at the first as *funerary colleges*, and enjoyed the special privileges accorded to such bodies: perhaps, when possible, *e.g.* at Ostia, they sheltered beneath the wing of the Great Mother of Pessinus.

In any case, the great numbers of Mithraists in the civil and military departments of the government cannot have failed rapidly to secure official tolerance for the faith which they professed.

When Mithraism attained its zenith, all doubt as to its external organisation is dispelled. It

¹ M.M.M. i. p. 280.

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ranks with and shares the characteristics of all other religious colleges (*sodalicia*) under the Empire. Its members were called '*Cultores Solis Invicti Mithrae*,' and each community displayed a **List of the Consecrated** (*album sacratorum*). Its worldly welfare was watched over by a **Committee** of *Decuriones* (a Senate in miniature), of whom the **First Ten** (*decem primi*) were accorded special privileges. The **Presidents** of this Committee were called '*Magistri*,' and were elected annually. Independent¹ of these posts was that of **Defender** (*Defensor*), whose business it was to guard the legal interests of the Brotherhood.

Finally, all financial concerns were in the hands of *Curatores*, whose designation is obvious.

In communities of such small dimensions—how small the Spelaea themselves show us²—it was essential that the spirit of **Brotherly Love** should be insisted on above all others. In Mithraism the very name of **Fratres** or **Consacranei** (and in a somewhat different sense of **Patres**) emphasised this necessary doctrine. From this common, though arbitrary, bond the little bands of co-religionists derived their fullest inspiration,

¹ The same man could be Pater Patrum, Magister and Defensor, C.I.L. vi. 47.

² See chap. v. p. 45.

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and saved themselves from otherwise inevitable extinction. Unlike the more familiar and popular cult of the Great Mother, they received assistance neither from the State nor from the Municipalities in which they resided. Only once¹ do we find the formula so frequent in the history of the Phrygian mysteries, '*loco dato decreto decurionum.*' In the vast majority of cases the Mithraists were forced to subsist alone and by their own endeavours. Their shrines were generally constructed on private ground, bought from, or presented by, some wealthy sympathiser. Even to provide a chapel complete with all its ornaments was a task frequently beyond the means of a single person, and the accomplishment of this munificent act merited a laudatory inscription of a special nature. Generally we find that the Brethren clubbed together to purchase or manufacture the adornments of their Spelaea, to paint the walls with brilliant colours, or add the porches and other subordinate chambers which the means of the original donor could not compass. Thus in one Mithraeum,² a 'freeman' and a freedman joined in offering an altar; two other brethren subscribed a second; and a slave out of his meagre

¹ At Milan, C.I.L. v. 5795.

² C.I.L. vi. 556, 717, 734.

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resources procured a third. It was by this co-operation of all classes, this true spirit of socialistic equality, that Mithraism, like our modern Freemasonry, defied the disintegrating forces which were working on the outside for its dissolution.

Its deadliest enemy came, indeed, from within. There was, as far as we know, no central supreme authority, which could combine the scattered units into a compact and formidable whole. Thus, when the crisis came, Mithraism, though it numbered countless adherents, though it boasted generals, governors, and emperors among the faithful, was helpless before the ordered onset of the Church Militant: isolated and impotent, its small communities could be attacked and crushed in detail.

Having considered the social aspects of the Cult, and seen its merits and defects, we may now go a little deeper, and examine its religious structure: we have regarded it so far as a political body; we have now to think of it as a **Church**.

Side by side with the secular offices which we have mentioned, the inscriptions afford a number of ecclesiastical titles such as '*Sacerdos*' (*ordo sacerdotum*), '*antistes*'; and in addition to these, again, are the various grade-names, which were

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held by the Faithful independently of their sacerdotal duties. There were therefore two sides to the religious life of the Mithraist, the **Liturgical** and the **Mystic**. Of these, the former is obviously more 'external' in character: it pretends to no knowledge of those 'Arcana' of the mysteries to which we are gradually descending, and may therefore be discussed before them.

That there were Mithraic '**Offices**' in the ecclesiastical sense can scarcely be denied. These in accordance with ancient Persian precedent would take place at dawn, noon, and sunset. The **Rising Sun** (Oriens) was especially commemorated by Mithraic piety. His birthday (Natalis) on Dec. 25 was, no doubt, also celebrated with becoming pomp; and the fact that initiations seem to have occurred by preference at the **Vernal Equinox** suggests that this season, too, was the occasion for solemn worship.

How far the Mithraic priests imitated their Magian brethren in those lengthy chants¹ with which sceptical writers credited them, we do not know. The doctrines of Mithraism, as has been

¹ Lucian, *Necyom.* c. 8. Catullus, 90, 5.

A few strange words, Nama Sebesio, Nabarze (=Invicto) may indicate the survival of Persian hymns. Cf. also the line quoted below, chap. vii. p. 90.

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observed, differed, in many instances quite fundamentally, from those of the Avestan Rule. In particular two practices, which certainly were not infrequent in Spelaea, may be noted here.

The first of these was the **Adoration of the Planets**. By the later Avestan Code, at any rate, the Planets were regarded as deadly enemies of Ormuzd: to offer them worship was simply to strengthen the hand of Ahriman, in fact to perpetrate the grossest blasphemy which a Zoroastrian could conceive.

This brings us to our second point, the **Sacrifice of Animals**, generally of a savage character such as wolf, boar, etc., whose remains have been discovered in connection with some Mithraea. Comparing this with the votary inscriptions to the god Areimanius, we should infer that the Mithraist had no scruples in offering a bloody sacrifice (as opposed to a bloodless libation to heavenly beings) to the ancient Persian god of the underworld,¹ to whom the name of the great *ἀντίθεος* of Ormuzd had been attached by indiscriminating ignorance. All this, it must be admitted, is largely conjectural; but we know enough of Mithraism by this time to be convinced of its complete 'unorthodoxy'; and it would not surprise us to find

¹ Her. vii. 114, ὁ ὑπὸ γῆν λεγόμενος εἶναι θεός.

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its adherents perfectly ready to placate their spiritual enemy, if indeed they had ever been taught to consider him as such.

As regards the other functions of the Mithraic priesthood, our ignorance is, unhappily, almost absolute. The care of the holy Water and sacred Flame was no doubt one of the most important duties of the **Antistes**. As to the **Sacerdos**, the most we can say is that he occupied the chief ecclesiastical office in the Mithraeum; in his presence (*astante sac.*) and under his direction (*prosedente sac.*) votive offerings were presented, and altars or statues set up in their intended place in the *crypta*. But with the various duties outlined above, the special province of the *Sacerdos* appears to have ended. Foremost in significance is the fact that he played no part in that *more secret side* of Mithraism with which we are now about to deal. In the conferring of degrees he is conspicuous by his absence. The same man might exercise supreme authority in both the Liturgical and the Mystical Rites of the Cult; but in the latter it is as *Pater Sacrorum*, or *Pater Patrum*, Head of the highest grade, not as *Sacerdos* that he performs this function.

We are now standing at the very door of the Mithraic Sanctuary, and we may say here, as we

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have said at the beginning, that our present knowledge does not admit us to a full participation of the mysteries enacted within it.

Something indeed may be gleaned from the characters who pass in and out from the sacred masquerade, and it is these that we now intend to consider. Something again, which will be reserved for the last chapter, is to be drawn from (in one sense) the least expected of all quarters, the unwitting testimony of their Christian enemies. From these two sources we can in some measure reconstruct the spirit and message of the Mithraic mysteries; and we shall see that, however much there is in them which appears to our eyes grotesque or puerile, there can be no doubt that they taught at least one Reality and enshrined one Eternal Truth.

Our examination of the mystical Externals of Mithraism must begin with a close study of one monument,¹ which we have deliberately reserved for this purpose. It represents the Mithraic Banquet, which occurs in miniature on most of the great Reliefs.²

Seated at a table, before which stands a tripod bearing four small cakes marked with a cross, are

¹ Found at Konjica (see above, chap. iii. p. 23).

² See Fig. 4, p. 73.

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two beardless figures, each of whom holds up his right hand (apparently) in the act of benediction. The personage on the spectator's left grasps a drinking horn in his left hand, while his companion holds a shapeless object, which is probably a loaf of bread. At either end of the table stand two figures. On the left, one in a Phrygian cap extends a cup towards the nearer banqueter: behind this cupbearer stands a similar personage with the head or rather mask of a Crow. Of the other two figures on the right, one, corresponding in position to the 'Crow,' bears the mask of a Lion: while the other, whose head is unfortunately damaged beyond all hope of recognition, proffers an object (loaf or cup?) to the second banqueter. Other details of the relief need not concern us.

It would be difficult to imagine a stranger and at first glance more unintelligible scene; but, fortunately, we are in a position to explain its outstanding peculiarities.

A series of inscriptions from a Spelaum at Rome¹ provides us with a list of Mithraic grades conferred (*tradere*) in person by the head of all, *Pater Patrum* (or *Pater Patratus*). They are the grade of **Father** (n. plur. *Patrica*), of the **Sun** (*Heliaca*), of the **Hidden** (*Cryfios*, *Chryfios*—the

¹ C.I.L. vi. 749-753.

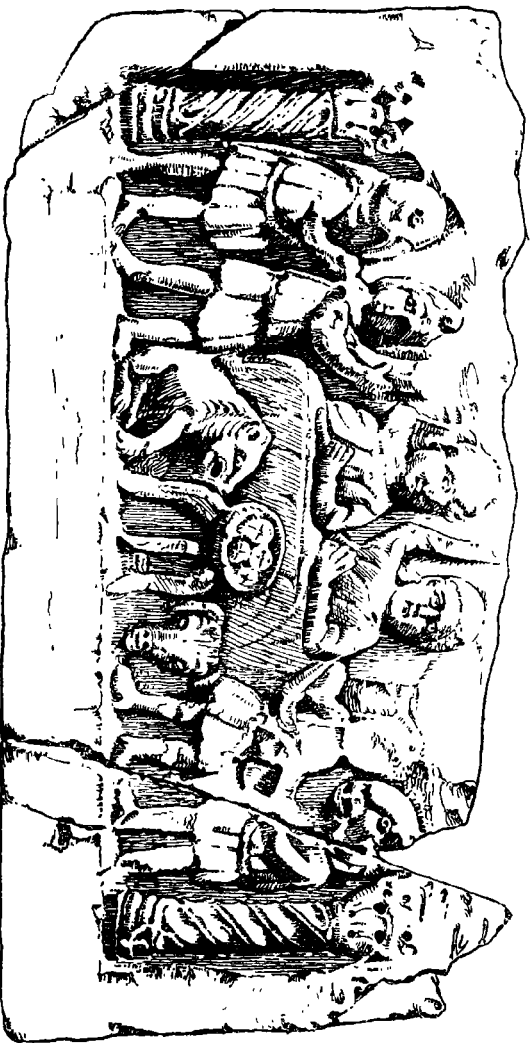


FIG. 4.—BAS-RELIEF FROM KONJICA (DALMATIA). Cumont, *Mystères de Mithra*, p. 164, fig. 21.

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verb here is either *tradere* or *ostendere*), of the **Lion** (*Leontica*), of the **Persian** (*Persica*), and of the (sacred) **Crow** (*Hierocoracica*). These names are also given by St. Jerome,¹ who adds a seventh, **Soldier** (*Miles*); and gives the order as Corax, Cryfios, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus (*sic*), Pater. In most of this we can follow him. For several reasons it is clear that the grade of Crow stood at the foot of the mystical ascent. On one of the inscriptions mentioned above, the *Pater Patrum* records the successful initiation of his own son in this degree thirty years after his own 'Reception' (*acceptio*). The only point of such a notice can be that the two things were practically, if not actually, identical. This is borne out, as we shall see, by Porphyry, so that we may accept it as certain.

The position of *Pater* and *Helios* is scarcely more open to question. The first recalls the Fatherhood of Mithras, whose representative the Pater is thus shown to be. Nor is it surprising that Helios, the Sun, Comrade of the Unconquered God should claim the second place in the Mithraic hierarchy. We may see, therefore, in the two seated figures at the Banquet either Mithras

¹ Ep. cvii., *Ad Laetam*.

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and the Sun themselves, or their mystical counterparts in the Cult.

Of the remaining personages in that scene, the Lion and the Persian (in the typical cap) are unmistakable. As to the final figure I have elsewhere¹ given some reasons for identifying it with the grade of Cryfios rather than with the 'Miles' of St. Jerome. Certainty is, of course, impossible.

Thus far the task of interpretation is not a difficult one; but when we attempt to go beyond these few facts, we find ourselves disappointingly at a loss. The best we can do with the meagre information at our disposal is to construct a picture of sufficient probability by a liberal use of the Comparative Method.

Thus with regard to the title '**Miles.**' We learn from Tertullian² that Mithraism exacted an **Oath of Allegiance** (*sacramentum*) from the recruits for its 'sacred warfare,' and signed or sealed them on the forehead as a memorial of their vow. In this obvious symbolism not only Christianity but also the cult of Isis agreed; and we may assume that, as with them the act of taking a quasi-military oath was the first starting-

¹ *Problem of the Mithraic Grades* (J.R.S., vol. ii. pt. 1, 1912, p. 56 sq.).

² *De Corona*, xv.

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point of the neophyte's life under the banner of his god, so with Mithraism the new brother in this ceremony became once for all the soldier of Mithras, dedicated to a lifelong struggle against the forces of Evil. An act of final renunciation which was imposed upon him before the name of Soldier was accorded seems to confirm this supposition.¹

Of the grades of '**Perses**' and '**Cryflos**' very little can be said. The former is referred to obscurely by Porphyry² as the 'Guardian of Fruits,' a title at present unintelligible. The grade was a high one, for the initiate used a special purification by Honey, which was attained only at the grade of Lion, and probably denoted a refined spirituality in those entitled to it.

The grade of **Cryflos**, which consisted apparently in the revelation of some Hidden Things, is at present equally unintelligible. The use of an accusative masculine plural instead of the usual neuter constitutes it a complete anomaly. An indirect reference in a Christian writer³ seems to show that the initiates of this degree were blindfolded during the ceremony and exposed to the ridicule of their brethren. Neither here nor in

¹ See below, chap. vii. p. 84.

² *De A.N.* c. 16.

³ Ps. Augustine, chap. cxiv., *Adv. Paganos*

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the case of Perses is it possible to state the part played or the doctrines revealed by these degrees.

When we come to the **Lions** we are on somewhat firmer grounds. This grade was in some ways closely connected with that of the Crows. Both played a recognisable part in the masquerade, just as both appear on most of the Reliefs. In the Spelaea, they seem to have acted the rôle of their mystic prototypes, the Lions roaring, and the Crows flapping their wings.¹ In respect of the Banquet also their positions were well defined. We are told by Prophyry² that the Crows only 'ministered' (οἱ ὑπηρετοῦντες) while the Lions 'partook' of the sacred feast (οἱ μετέχοντες). The latter, as we have said, purified themselves with honey: the reason being that they represented **Fire** to which the Element, Water, was opposed. For the Crows, the distinction did not exist. The novices of this grade, often mere boys, had not yet learned to throw off the shackles of the world: before becoming communicants they had to undergo a 'new birth unto righteousness.'

We have found, then, that Mithraism contained

¹ Ps. Aug., l. c.

² *De Abstinencia*, iv. 16

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a sacred drama¹ or masquerade, enacted by mystical characters, who formed among themselves an organised hierarchy. What that drama was, or how it varied, we do not know. That it cannot have had any direct relation to the Taurobolium is, however much we should like to accept it, an untenable theory. It is, on the whole, more fruitful to confess our ignorance, and turn our attention to the Faith which lay concealed beneath this mass of mythological mimicry.

We shall descend then yet deeper into the heart of Mithraism, and consider its message to the Latin World.

¹ Cf. [Hegemonius] 'tanquam elegans mimus perages mysteria.'

CHAPTER VII

THE MESSAGE OF MITHRAISM

IN this chapter we approach the most difficult aspect of our subject. So far we have followed the growth of Mithraism and surveyed its expansion in the Roman Empire: we have looked into its hoard of ancient myths, its strange jumble of Aryan and Semitic traditions: we have considered its social and ritual organisation, its daily life in the worldly and in the religious spheres: we have in short examined its Externals.

Were this all that we could say of the Mysteries, we could dismiss them as a theme of purely archæological interest, as a mere congeries of antique rites and doctrines, to which a number of Persian exiles clung with pathetic strength in the land of the foreigner; or as a secret Society, not unlike modern Freemasonry, which attracted

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adherents by the simple bait of curiosity and by the gregarious instinct of the average man.

Viewed even in this attenuated light, Mithraism would remain a subject full of human interest; but for those who look more closely, it has another deeper and far more intimate side. It was not merely an anachronism in the Roman world, the cherished corpse of a long dead Persian faith. It was a living, active creed, full of spiritual energy, and possessed of many high and enlightened Truths. It is this Mithraism that we shall now attempt to discover.

The task, we repeat, is by no means an easy one. The facts are few and far between; and even these have, for the most part, to be gleaned from the chance remarks of some Imperial chronologist, or from the bitter mouth of a religious enemy. Conjecture, in such a situation, is inevitable; but where corroborative evidence is to be found, either in the Zoroastrian code or from the monuments themselves, it is possible to reconstruct the Mithraic Faith without too blind a reliance on prejudice or personal conviction.

At the outset we have to notice one prominent characteristic of Mithraism which must influence all our ideas upon the nature of this religion. It

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was a system solely and entirely devoted to the needs of the **Male**.

This fact, it must be admitted, has for a long time been in question; but the single argument that can be adduced against it lies in a confused and damaged text of Porphyry,¹ which speaks of a female grade of hyænas, as belonging to the Mithraic mysteries. Where the writer obtained this idea it is impossible to say, if indeed it is not an interpolation. The fact remains that it is opposed by a considerable mass of negative evidence which may fairly be said to dispose of its authority. Not only does no goddess appear (except very rarely and in an entirely incidental position)² upon the monuments, but no inscription has come down to us on which a woman has recorded her devotion to the god or her rank in his mysteries. Tertullian, who repeatedly gives long lists to the virgins and widows dedicated to various deities, omits all mention of Mithraism in this connection. Finally, we may recall the fact that the mysteries were found first among the *Cilician Pirates*. It is in just such surroundings, in the mingled atmosphere of superstition

¹ *De Abst.*, l. c.

² *E.g.* as in an interpolated Roman Pantheon or an assembly of the Planets.

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and iron courage, that we should expect a man's religion to flourish.

If then this theory be accepted as an established fact, it will go far to explain the next most striking feature of Mithraism. This may be called the **Tests or Trials of Fortitude** (*βάσανοι*).

Of these there were twelve in all¹ (or, as some writers aver, eighty!); and in the old days, in the mountains of the Near East, they must have been more than moderately severe. The Neophyte was exposed to scorching heat and biting cold, to hunger, thirst, the terrors of drowning, to every torment (they are also called '*cruciatus*') which the wit of man could devise to render the human body '**Passionless**' (*ἀπαθής*), to inure it to hardship, and strengthen it against temptation. Such was the candidate's entry into the mysteries. In later times these trials were no doubt reduced in austerity, but a Christian writer can still tell us of men with bound hands who are 'flung over trenches filled with water,' a relic perhaps of a far more terrible struggle with some raging mountain torrent of Anatolia.

Thus far, then, the neophyte had learned two lessons—**Fortitude, and Subdual of Passions.**

¹ Nonnus and the Commentators on St. Gregory (Naz.) are divided on the subject.

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His next lesson was **Renunciation**. At some point, presumably as the last test had been triumphantly surmounted, a Crown of Victory was presented to the elated youth; yet ere he could accept it, he was warned to thrust it from him with the words 'Mithras is my crown.' So even in the moment of success, he learned entire submission and self dedication to his god. It is not surprising that Tertullian¹ held up this custom as an example and reproach to his 'Fellow soldiers in Christ.'

When the act of Renunciation had been made, the candidate was **Sealed**² upon the forehead and become a 'tried soldier' of Mithras. It was perhaps then also that he was **Baptized to the Remission of Sins**. Justin Martyr³ tells us that 'Bread and a cup of water' were placed with certain incantations in the rite of initiation. If this statement is correct, it describes an imperfect or preliminary act of **Communion**, which foreshadowed that fuller Participation which only those who had reached the grade of Lion were allowed to experience.⁴

¹ Tert., l. c.

² Tert., *De Praescript. Haeret.*, 40.

³ Justin, *Apolog.* 1, 66.

⁴ Water was 'hostile' to Fire, the Element which the 'Lion' typified (Porph., *De A.N.*, 15). If 'water' is right here, it cannot be connected with the 'Fiery' grade.

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Yet before the neophyte had climbed to this spiritual eminence, a last and greatest trial of his fortitude and fidelity still awaited him. By his previous tests, he had partially accomplished the act of spiritualisation, and since then by continual purification had brought his body, thus subdued, into a condition of preparedness for the supreme moment of transmutation. Now he had to **Die**.

That the Mithraic mysteries (in common with all others before and since) contained a **Mystical Death** appears perhaps a somewhat hazardous suggestion. In reality, *the fact* is practically undeniable. Tertullian speaks of an 'image of Resurrection' which the Devil had introduced into the Mithraic rites with the object of overthrowing and contaminating the Truth. The other side of the same ritual act is fortunately preserved for us by the chronologist of Commodus. That Emperor, we are told, 'polluted the mysteries of Mithras by a real homicide, when something of the kind is done or spoken there to produce terror.'¹

Interpreting this sentence in the light of our previous knowledge we obtain two facts: (1) that there was a symbolic *murder*, (2) that it was performed by the *Pater Patrum*, who was the

¹ See above, chap. iv. p. 37.

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direct representative of Mithras (since it must be presumed that Commodus would be content with none but the chief rôle in this as in all else). The mythical explanation of this act would then run as follows :

‘Mithras produced vegetable and animal life by the slaughter of the Bull ; so also he produced human life by the murder of a (Primeval) Man.’

And the mystical doctrine drawn from this creative act would be : ‘ By suffering “ death ” at the hands of the Pater Patrum, the initiate passes into true “ life.” ’

If this ritual ‘ murder ’ appears at first so strange as to be almost incredible, it should be remembered that the slaughter of the Bull is on exactly the same spiritual level. In the latter act Mithras has taken the place of the Spirit of Evil. May he not have done so in the former ? May we not have here a Mithraic version of the death (or murder) of Gayomard, the Primeval Man, of whom it is related in Bundahish¹ that, after he had expired at the hands of Ahriman, the precious metals and many healing plants and finally *the first (truly) human couple* emerged from his body ? If we accept this as a tentative explanation of the ritual ‘ murder ’ in Mithraism, we are enabled to

¹ Bund., iv. 17 ; xv.

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fill in a considerable blank in the teaching of the Mysteries, *i.e.* that part which concerned the origin and future of mankind. The important point, however, is that the 'murder' in the Mysteries does not stand or fall with the opinions entertained about this theory. Whatever we may think about the rite, its *existence* cannot be gainsaid.

We have followed the neophyte to the moment of his mystical Death. He 'rose,' he was 'born again,' as we may suggest with great plausibility, into the grade of Lion. As the representative of Fiery heat, he had now become a purged and spiritualised being. For him honey¹ and not water was now the lustral agent: to him was presented not 'a cup of water' but a draught of that consecrated wine which in the Latin world replaced the ancient Haoma of the Persians: from this moment onwards he was admitted to the full Mithraic **Communion**, and might wait in patience till he reached the highest post and could sanctify where as yet he might only receive.

We may now sum up the doctrines inculcated by this remarkable religion. (1) **Subdual of the**

¹ Porph., *De A. N.*, 15. The 'Lion' even cleansed his *tongue* with honey as was the custom with *new-born* babes. (Cf. Cumont, *M.M.*, 1913, p.162.)

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Flesh by 'Mortification.' (2) **Redemption and Salvation.** A mystical **Death** to the World, and a **Rebirth** in the Spirit were blessings which Mithras, by his representative, alone dispensed. (3) A spiritual **Confirmation** of this Regeneration, which fitted the Participant to enjoy **Everlasting Life** ('Απειρος Αιών).¹ This in the mysteries took the form of Communion (bread and, presumably, wine).

The teaching of Mithraism on the subject of the Life Eternal has unfortunately been lost to us. The Parsi doctrine² predicts the Coming of a Saviour, Saoshyant, the long expected son of Zoroaster, who will slaughter the ox Sarsaok (Hadhayaos), and from its marrow and the sacred Haoma will mix a draught of Immortality for the faithful. If some such belief was cherished by the Mithraists, they might without difficulty have assigned the chief rôle to their god, thus making him the Omega as well as the Alpha of Created Life. There are, however, two reasons for accepting this conclusion with caution. Firstly, there is not a shred of evidence to confirm it; and secondly, it is asserted by Origen that the Mysteries actually contained a doctrine, borrowed from

¹ Antiochus of Commagene, see chap. iii. p. 14.

² Bund., xxx. 25.

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Semitic sources, of the soul's return to Heaven up the 'ladder' of the Planets.

According to this theory¹ (which is, of course, entirely inconsistent with Persian theology, the Kinvad Bridge, etc.) the souls of men passed at their birth down a Seven Gated Staircase. At each gate, which was ruled by a Planet, they assumed a terrestrial attribute, arriving finally upon Earth in full possession of the human complement of vices, virtues, and faculties: on their return after death, they discarded each of these attributes in the reverse order. The whole spirit of this doctrine is at variance with the Mithraic conception of Sin, Mortification, and Regeneration, and it is difficult to believe that it formed an essential feature in the theological system of the Mysteries. It was one of those alien accretions, which were among the worst failings of Mithraism, and which must very largely have destroyed its power of working as a simple and coherent creed. It is impossible, therefore, to escape the strong inward conviction, that a less fatalistic, a less alien, a less incongruous doctrine revealed, to the higher initiates at least, the true scheme of Mithraic Eschatology.

One thing however is certain, for we have it

¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, vi. 21.

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from the lips of the Imperial Initiate himself.¹ There existed a well-defined body of **Injunctions** (*ἐντολαί*); and by following these and clinging to his Father Mithras as a sure cable and a haven of safety, the faithful devotee might be certain of reaching the Everlasting Bliss; for as Mithras was the Judge of the Dead, so also was he the Protector of the Living, and the Guide of departing, Souls.

Before leaving the general question of Mithraic beliefs, we may touch briefly on two other 'articles of faith' as having specially attracted the notice of the Christian enemy.

(1) The **Rock Mother**, to which a possible origin has been assigned, together with the oft-recurring title *θεὸς ἐκ πέτρας*, the 'God from the Rock,' was denounced by the Christian writers² as a blasphemous caricature of their 'sacred and venerable' secret, that there was but one 'Rock hewn without hands,' one 'Living Stone,' which was Christ Himself.

(2) A solitary line from the ritual³ describes the 'Mystic of the Bull Theft, clever son of a noble father.' The Christians found in this belief

¹ Julian, *Convivium*, 336, c.

² Firmicus Maternus, *De Errore*, c. 20; Justin, 1, c.

³ Firm. Mat., *op. cit.* c. 4.

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a fine object for derision. That the god of the Mithraists was a thief seemed in itself an eloquent condemnation of the Mysteries. Judging now with more impartial eyes, we can see that the truth lies far more probably in the opposite direction. An enlightened religion makes use of all its symbols for an enlightened purpose. If, as we surmise, the god had tricked an evil demon of his prisoner, and by a sacred theft created or regenerated the Earth, the interpretation of this story for the needs of the initiates would take a moral line of some description. What that line was, we do not know. Perhaps the Mithraist was taught to be 'wise as a serpent,' to repel guile with guile. In any case, a glaring inconsistency, such as this belief suggests, cannot have existed in a religion which preached Renunciation and Redemption.

We have now surveyed, in however cursory a manner, the vital principles of the Mithraic creed. We have seen that it contains in 'outward and visible form' the sacred 'Rock,' Baptism, the Sign on the Brow, Communion of Bread and Cup; and on its inward and spiritual side the doctrine of Sin, Redemption, Sacramentary Grace and Salvation to Everlasting Life. Is it surprising that in the face of this astonishing similarity the

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Christian apologists denounced the Mysteries as a most crafty and insidious attack upon the Truth, made not, be it observed, by men (human plagiarism is never suggested), but by that great Counterfeiter, the Devil himself?

We may note this too. It is just because the similarity *was* so striking that the charges made by these writers are often little more than vague abuse. Beyond the fact of resemblance, they had no need to go; for it is clear that the more close and startling this was, the more dangerous and diabolical the assault. With the Mithraic mysteries, as perhaps with no other Pagan cult, there was to be a war of extermination.

Modern, and perhaps especially English, thought, so long accustomed to 'compromise' and 'toleration,' will look askance at this attitude of hostility, which asked no questions, because to it no questions were necessary. Mithraism, we feel impelled to urge, had paved the way for the spread of Christianity in the Latin West. It had itself entered the Empire on that wave of spiritual reawakening which rolled in from the East upon a land dying under a drought of moral and intellectual sterility. It had brought refreshment to minds parched on the barren battlefields of philosophy, or pining away in the wilderness of

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blank, unquestioning ignorance. To all these it spoke of a new hope and a new light, it brought a real message, and pointed the way to a real regeneration. We shall not judge it by the infamy of a single Emperor; or dismiss it with nebulous charges of human sacrifice, of orgies held in the darkness, of crimes unknown and therefore styled unnamable. All these things and more were laid at the door of the Christians themselves. If in the heat of conflict they now and then were goaded to retort the foul untruths, we may excuse an indiscreet enthusiasm, while we refrain from aping it. Those who desire to judge the question with impartiality would do well to remember that no definite charge (save that of diabolic, *i.e.* supernatural intervention) has even been made (much less substantiated) against the Mithraic mysteries. Unlike their Pagan rivals, they alone stand without reproach: they alone are revealed, even in the mouth that curses them, as the vehicle of a pure and enlightened creed.

If we do not keep these facts clearly in our minds, we shall not only be underestimating the value of Mithraism, we shall be failing to appreciate the meaning of the final combat. To assail with mockery the gross and ludicrous obscenities of other cults (the mysteries of the

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Cabeiri, Baubo, and the rest) was an easy task to which the Apologists addressed themselves with fervour and success. All these were so far removed, even on a moral plane, from Christianity, that the mere exposure of their secrets was a sufficient answer to their pretensions. It was because Mithraism challenged and defied this test that its existence was a constant peril to the Church. It fell at the last, not because it was entirely bad, but *because it was so nearly good*.

Many indeed of its adherents may have quietly joined the ranks of the new religion, to find that it held for them the whole of their treasured longings and far more; but for the rest, the struggle was to the death. Its details are practically unknown, although from Alexandria, from Trebizonde, from Rome, come tidings of shrines destroyed and symbols exposed to ridicule. The end is short in the telling, but in ruthless persecution it may have been long; for the Church crushed her enemies with unflinching hand, and human systems sustain oppression better than they resist decay.

One instance only of the methods of extermination has been so far revealed by Archæology, but it is full of grim and pregnant suggestion. In 1895 a Mithraeum of the usual type was discovered

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at Sarreburg (Pons Saravi). The great bas-relief lay in fragments upon the floor, and on the largest of these was extended the skeleton of a man, whose hands had been fastened behind his back with an iron chain. His surroundings left little doubt as to the cause of this singular inhumation. Some pagan priest had disobeyed the decrees of a Christian Emperor. Discovered, he had paid the penalty with his life, and his corpse had thus laid upon this Mithraic Holy of Holies the most inexpiable of all defilements to the Persian mind.

So was the Invincible god, Vanquisher of the Sun, himself subdued. His very name—the Name by which he was ‘invoked at the sacrifice’—for centuries passed into oblivion. His shrines, desolate and polluted, called—not in vain—upon the kindly Earth to cover them, and only a few monuments survived to excite an ignorant wonder or a fantastic erudition.

We write his Epitaph in the dying words of his noblest and most devoted follower, that bitter cry of one who saw in his own untimely end the doom of all the hopes that he had cherished for the ultimate salvation of his Empire—

‘Thou hast prevailed, O Man of Galilee.’

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